DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 401 050 PS 024 886

AUTHOR Lounsbury, John H.
TITLE Key Characteristics of Middle Level Schools. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education, Urbana, Ill.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO EDO-PS-96-13
PUB DATE Nov 96
CONTRACT RR93002007
NOTE 3p.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses - ERIC Clearinghouse Products (071) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Aspiration; Adolescent Development; Adolescents; Community Involvement; Curriculum Development; *Early Adolescents; Educational Attitudes; Educational Environment; *Educational Objectives; *Educational Principles; Family Involvement; Guidance Programs; Intermediate Grades; Junior High Schools; *Middle Schools; School Policy; Student Attitudes; Student Evaluation; Student Needs; Teacher Attitudes; Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS *Developmentally Appropriate Programs; ERIC Digests; Middle School Students; National Middle School Association; *This We Believe; Turning Points (Report)

ABSTRACT

Concerns about middle level education began early in this century and will continue to be discussed by researchers and observers well into the next century. This digest examines the evolving characteristics and goals of middle level education, especially in terms of the most recent statements of purpose by major organizations in the field. Noting that the characteristics of junior high schools identified during the 1920s, 1940s, and 1950s formed the framework for defining an effective middle level school, the digest explains that during the 1960s the middle school emerged as an alternative to the junior high school, which was seen as intransigent and dominated by the senior high school. However, a consensus definition of key characteristics was not reached until the 1980s when the National Middle School Association published "This We Believe" and the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development published "Turning Points." The most recent definition of key components or cnaracteristics of a good middle level school appeared in November 1995 when "This We Believe: Developmentally Responsive Middle Level Schools" was revised by the National Middle School Association. The document describes six conditions or characteristics that developmentally responsive middle level schools should evidence: (1) educators committed to young adolescents; (2) a shared vision; (3) high expectations for all; (4) an adult advocate for every student; (5) family and community partnerships; and (6) a positive school climate. Following these foundational principles or conditions, the document identifies six major programmatic areas: (1) curriculum that is challenging, integrative, and exploratory; (2) varied teaching and learning approaches; (3) assessment and evaluation that promote learning; (4) flexible organizational structures; (5) programs and policies that foster health, wellness, and safety; and (6) comprehensive guidance and support services. (LPP)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education

University of Illinois • 51 Gerty Drive • Champaign, IL 61820-7469
(217) 333-1386 • (800) 583-4135 • ericeece@uiuc.edu

ERIC DIGEST
November 1996 • EDO-PS-96-13

ED 401 050

Key Characteristics of Middle Level Schools

John H. Lounsbury

Concerns about middle level education began early in this century and will continue to be discussed by researchers and observers well into the next century. This digest examines the evolving characteristics and goals of middle level education in all settings, especially in terms of the most recent statements of purpose by major organizations in the field.

In the 1920s, as the junior high school was gaining acceptance, major statements identifying important characteristics of this new institution were put forth, including those by two of the major founders, Leonard Koos (1920) and Thomas Briggs (1920). Briggs stated: "In its essence the junior high school is a device of democracy whereby nurture may cooperate with nature to secure the best results possible for each individual adolescent as well as for society at large" (p. 327). In the 1940s and 1950s, as efforts were made to bring about the renaissance of the junior high school, some writers described what these schools ought to be like. The most influential statement was developed by Gruhn and Douglass (1947). They proposed and described six major functions: integration, exploration, guidance, differentiation, socialization, and articulation. These functions remain today as a foundational framework for defining an effective middle level school.

The Middle School Emerges

In the 1960s, under the leadership of the late William Alexander, a middle school of grades 5-8 or grades 6-8 was advanced as an alternative to the 7-9 junior high school, which had shown itself to be rather intransigent, dominated by the senior high school, and not what Koos and Briggs envisioned. Attracting immediate interest, the middle school idea became the focus of a reform movement, especially among those who earlier sought to reform the junior high school. A consensus definition of key characteristics emerged in 1982 when the young National Middle School Association (NMSA) published a position paper entitled *This We Believe*. Included in the document were ten "essential elements of a 'true' middle school" (NMSA, 1982, pp. 10-15): (1) educators knowledgeable about and committed to young adolescents, (2) a balanced curriculum based on student needs, (3) a range of organizational arrangements, (4) varied instructional strategies, (5) a full exploratory program, (6) comprehensive advising and counseling, (7) continuous progress for students, (8) evaluation procedures compatible with the nature of young adolescents, (9) cooperative planning, and (10) positive school climate. This list became a commonly cited standard for defining a middle school. The influence of this document at a time when the number of middle schools was growing by leaps and bounds was substantial.

PS 024888

Turning Points

In 1989, *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century* was released by the Council on Adolescent Development of the Carnegie Corporation of New York. This landmark report, released with considerable fanfare, put middle grades education on the public's—not just the profession's—agenda. In addition to vivid descriptions of the plight of today's young adolescents, buttressed with hard data, *Turning Points* presented the following eight major recommendations needed to improve the education of young adolescents (Carnegie Council, 1989, pp. 36-70): (1) create small communities for learning, (2) teach a core academic program, (3) ensure success for all students, (4) empower teachers and administrators to make decisions about the experiences of middle grade students, (5) staff middle grade schools with teachers who are expert at teaching young adolescents, (6) improve academic performance through fostering the health and fitness of young adolescents, (7) reengage families in the education of young adolescents, and (8) connect schools with communities.

This We Believe—1995

The most recent definition of the key components or characteristics of a good middle level school appeared in November 1995 when *This We Believe: Developmentally Responsive Middle Level Schools* was released by the National Middle School Association. Developed by a committee of recognized leaders in the movement, critiqued by dozens of practitioners, and ultimately approved by the NMSA Board of Trustees, this paper reflects the cumulative experience of the thousands of committed educators who have reconceptualized middle level education over the last decade. A new position paper was called for by changes in conditions and the lessons learned since 1982. A statement of rationale built around the nature of young adolescents and current society introduces the paper: "Young people undergo more rapid and profound personal changes during the years between 10 and 15 than at any other period of their lives" (pp. 5-6). But it is not the extent of change so much as the variability of change that creates problems for students and teachers alike. Dissimilar rates of growth are common in all areas of development so that youngsters of the same chronological age will look and act markedly different.

The paper maintains that changes in society have made the road to maturity much more difficult for youth to travel as they leave the security of childhood and reach for the maturity of late adolescence. Developmentally responsive middle schools must take into account all that is known about young adolescents and the cultural context in which they live. The document presents and describes six conditions or

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

characteristics that developmentally responsive middle level schools should exhibit. The first, **educators committed to young adolescents**, has importance because the middle school and the junior high before it both have been handicapped by the fact that teachers, with few exceptions, were prepared for elementary or high school education. Since the middle school concept is grounded in the nature of young adolescents—individuals who are quite distinct from children or late adolescents—this condition has been a barrier.

The second, **a shared vision**, highlights the importance of educators possessing a vision that is "idealistic and uplifting" and reflects "the very best we can imagine about all the elements of schooling, including student achievement, student-teacher relationships, and community participation" (p. 14).

The third, **high expectations for all**, calls for teachers, parents, and students themselves to have high expectations. The paper points out that having high expectations means "empowering students to learn, to become intellectually engaged, and to behave in keeping with responsible citizenship" (p. 16).

The fourth, **an adult advocate for every student**, reaffirms the long recognized need for each individual at this time of extensive and often traumatic development to have an understanding adult as an advocate and guide.

The fifth, **family and community partnerships**, echoes the currently widespread call for increased family and community participation in the education of youth that comes from government, parent and teacher organizations, foundations, and businesses.

The sixth condition, **a positive school climate**, recognizes that the school itself is a teacher. The nature of its environment, both in physical facilities and human relationships, is an important educational condition and establishes the context in which learning takes place.

Following these foundational principles or conditions, the document identifies six major programmatic areas. Specific decisions in those components should reflect the prior six principles. The first calls for a **curriculum that is challenging, integrative, and exploratory**. Curriculum encompasses much more than the collective courses of study and must reflect the nature and needs of young adolescents. The entire curriculum should be exploratory, not just those courses so designated.

The second characteristic, **varied teaching and learning approaches**, is an obvious need given the diversity of learning styles and mental maturation levels present in any group of young adolescents.

The third area is a call for **assessment and evaluation that promote learning**. The inadequacy of traditional grading systems and the negative lessons they teach have led to demands for more authentic measures of student progress. These approaches are less competitive and more informative, and they involve students in self-evaluation.

The fourth aspect, **flexible organizational structures**, is a reflection of the school's attempt to accommodate students' diversity, their need for identification with a group of peers, and the need to break the rigidity of the typical uniform schedule.

The fifth area, **programs and policies that foster health, wellness, and safety**, recognizes both the relationship of health to student achievement and current concern for student safety.

The last component, **comprehensive guidance and support services**, continues an age-old acceptance of the school's responsibility to provide more than direct instruction. Young adolescents especially need programs that provide for peer discussion, personal attention by professionals, and referral services to specialists when needed.

Conclusion

In elaborating these two sets of characteristics, the document "delineates a vision of what developmentally responsive middle schools could be and should be" (p. 10). It minces no words nor straddles any fences in describing desirable conditions for a middle level educational program regardless of the setting. The paper concludes with these two sentences in its call for action: "The importance of achieving developmentally responsive middle level schools cannot be overemphasized. The nature of the educational programs young adolescents experience during this formative period of life will, in large measure, determine the future for all of us" (p. 33). It is especially important to remember that, as *This We Believe* itself makes clear, the middle school concept cannot be communicated adequately in a list of characteristics. The middle school ideal is an entity, as much a philosophy of education as a composite of educational programs. Its successful operation is as dependent upon teachers' attitudes and approaches as upon their technical skills and knowledge. It is this strong philosophical foundation, not the more commonly cited organizational and programmatic characteristics, that has enlisted the commitment of teachers and made it possible for middle level education to become one of the longest running, most extensive educational reform movements in the United States.

For More Information

Briggs, T. (1920). *The Junior High School*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development. (1989). *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century*. New York: The Carnegie Corporation of New York. ED 312 322.

Gruhn, W., and H. Douglass. (1947). *The Modern Junior High School*. New York: The Ronald Press.

Koos, L. (1920). *The Junior High School*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Howe.

National Middle School Association (NMSA). (1982, 1992). *This We Believe*. Columbus, OH: Author. ED 226 513.

National Middle School Association (NMSA). (1995). *This We Believe: Developmentally Responsive Middle Level Schools*. Columbus, OH: Author. ED 390 546.

References identified with an ED (ERIC document) or EJ (ERIC journal) number are cited in the ERIC database. Most documents are available in ERIC microfiche collections at more than 900 locations worldwide, and can be ordered through EDRS: (800) 443-ERIC. Journal articles are available from the original journal, interlibrary loan services, or article reproduction clearinghouses such as: UMI (800) 732-0616; or ISI (800) 523-1850.

This publication was funded by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract no. DERR93002007. The opinions expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of OERI. ERIC Digests are in the public domain and may be freely reproduced.